

## Supporting Adult Learners with Refugee Experiences through English Language Instruction

Raj Khatri  
*University of Victoria*

### Abstract

Canada welcomes around 24,000 refugees annually (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2015; 2016). Many adult learners with refugee experiences join English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes every year, whether these classes be federally or provincially funded. These adult learners with refugee experiences bring to EAL classes varied educational and life experiences. Some of these learners have little or interrupted schooling (Finn, 2010). Learners with this profile may have also encountered forced displacement, loss of identity, torture, and trauma. These experiences, along with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which some people with this background may suffer from, can lead to concentration difficulties and memory loss (Hauksson, 2003). This, in turn, can negatively impact additional language acquisition (Finn, 2010). When EAL instructors are unaware of refugee experiences, they may find it difficult to deal with these circumstances appropriately, which may create uncomfortable situations both for learners with refugee experiences and their instructors in class. To work with such learners, it is important that EAL instructors be very skilled, experienced, and patient. The present article provides readers with an opportunity to understand various refugee experiences, the acculturation process these learners may go through, and lesson planning strategies that can be incorporated when supporting adult learners with refugee experiences.

### Introduction

Canada welcomes approximately 12,000 refugees from around the world and provides asylum to more than 10,000 persecuted persons annually (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2015). In addition, 25,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Canada between November 2015 and February 2016 (CIC, 2016). Immediate service that includes food, accommodation, and medical support is provided upon their arrival in Canada. In addition to these provisions, refugees have access to educational opportunities after their arrival in Canada. These educational opportunities, especially in EAL, are crucial for refugees in their resettlement process (Perry, 2013). Supplementing these services on the provincial level, BC TEAL has recently begun its pilot phase of the BC TEAL Refugee Project to provide learners with refugee experiences with EAL support in the province (BC TEAL, 2016). However, the path to helping these newcomers is challenging. For example, some learners with refugee experiences have little or interrupted schooling (Finn, 2010). Adult EAL programs for learners with refugee experiences thus face several challenges, and working in such programs warrants high levels of professionalism, determination, and dedication. When providing language support, EAL instructors should be well prepared and adequately equipped to work with the specific language learning needs of these adult learners with refugee experiences.

Since EAL instructors often serve as the first link for learners with refugee experiences to their new home as well as serve as a major source of cultural information and early contributions

to refugee acculturation (Gordon, 2011), EAL instructors have several responsibilities to perform when teaching these learners. They need to incorporate skills and procedures to cater to the needs of learners with refugee experiences, pay special consideration to the classroom environment, and support learner participation in and outside the classroom. It is important that strategies be identified to help these learners with the ability to retain and recall new information during language learning. It may be that EAL instructors need to constantly strive to raise learner self-esteem and provide a non-threatening environment for these learners to grow and succeed. They need to understand the impact of refugee experiences in language learning in adult EAL classrooms, conduct needs analyses for learners with refugee experiences, take into account cultural sensitivity, and gather strategies, tools, and resources important for teaching this profile of learner. A positive environment should be created for learners with refugee experiences to thrive and succeed in a new country and culture, which they can do by having a clear understanding of refugee experiences, identifying the process of resettlement or acculturation along with awareness of cultural diversity, and planning EAL instruction to suit the needs of these learners.

### **Understanding the Refugee Experience**

As refugees arrive in Canada, whether it be through government or privately sponsored sources, sponsors typically engage in significant preparation and set aside a considerable amount of resources to welcome and help these newcomers integrate into Canadian society. EAL instructors are encouraged to consider a number of issues related to refugee experiences when designing lessons for this profile of learner. Learners with refugee experiences come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds, and their challenges and needs are different from other adult learners (Perry 2009; Muth & Perry, 2010). Such learners typically have overcome several adverse challenges before they arrived in Canada. Many of them may have escaped from persecution and conflicts at home, which might have been followed by severe adversity during a prolonged stay in refugee camps with limited or no access to healthcare. They may have been facing complex physical and mental challenges as a result of torture, conflicts, and displacements. Leaving their country, culture, and home behind and making new homes and new friends in a completely new country can be challenging for these learners who may have even lost some of their loved ones because of persecution or displacement. Some learners with refugee experiences may have either experienced interrupted schooling or have never had an opportunity for formal education in their countries of origin (Finn 2010; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015). They may have been living their lives in poverty and experiencing depleted financial resources. They generally may face a loss of identity and self-esteem and suffer from isolation and loneliness. These learners sometimes carry with them a sense of instability, fear, and despair. Since knowing the language of the new land is one of the opportunities that contributes towards refugees' having employment and better health status (Tshabangu-Soko & Caron, 2011), it is essential that these learners be provided with language learning opportunities in a warmly welcoming environment upon their arrival. For this, EAL instructors who understand the experiences these refugee learners have undergone can begin to create a warm, welcoming environment, and help these individuals learn the language and the culture to thrive in a new society.

Learners with refugee experiences may have been exposed to painful threatening experiences and traumatic events, and victims of trauma may undergo attention and memory loss (Kosa & Hansen, 2006). Under such conditions, learners' ability to acquire an additional language may be adversely affected (Finn, 2010). As both short- and long-term memory plays a significant role in language acquisition (Finn, 2010), it is important that teaching methods and pedagogies that help learners with cognitive difficulties retaining new information be continuously explored and incorporated in class. Providing repetition and review and using flashcards that learners can take home are some of the techniques that can be used with beginner-level learners of English for fostering additional language acquisition (Finn, 2010). Pedagogical practices related to the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006) can also be employed with learners to process new language in a better way that enables them to "draw on the intelligences that work the best for them" (Medley, 2012, p. 115). Mutual trust should develop between the instructor and learners and among learners, and one way to establish rapport and understanding could be by playing icebreaker games (Hart, 2007). In sum, it is practical for instructors to understand various refugee experiences and seek strategies and procedures that can help these learners with additional language learning.

### **Resettlement and the Acculturation Process**

As with immigrants and international students, refugees also take time to become adjusted during their resettlement process in Canada. The resettlement or acculturation process may take several months and years, depending on refugees' individual circumstances, such as the frequency and length of displacements learners have experienced, the length of dealing with trauma, the severity of consequences of war and violence, feelings of loss and loneliness, and the language barrier.

### **Social Adjustment**

According to Stein (1981), there are four stages of refugee adjustment: (1) the initial period of arrival, (2) the period of the first couple of years, (3) the period after about half a decade, and (4) the period after about a decade. In the initial stage, which lasts until the first few months after their arrival, refugees can overwhelmingly feel the loss, whether it be social, occupational, or personal. They are completely in a new land where they may depend on others for everything. They often seem withdrawn and fatigued and easily distracted. During the second stage, people with refugee experiences start to gradually move ahead from their recovery of losses and begin their new life all over again (Keller, 1975). In their new move, they may join school and change their jobs. In the third stage, which occurs after four or five years of arriving in the new land, people with refugee experiences are mostly adjusted to their new society (Stein, 1979). They have "acquired" both the culture and the language (Stein, 1981, p. 326). However, if people with refugee experiences are unable to meet their goals at this period, they are discouraged from pursuing their aims in life. At this point, they are likely to pass their aspirations and expectations on to their children (Soskis, 1967), thinking that their children would accomplish what they could not do themselves. As they reach the fourth stage or period, people with refugee experiences reach stability to a greater extent although they still continue to recover from their lost status (Stein, 1981). This is the final stage on the way to integration. At this stage, they may start to see the positive things in the new land and culture. They may gradually begin to come to

terms with both the past and the present conditions of their circumstances. People with refugee experiences might possess a sense that the new land is their home and the new culture is part of their life, too. They typically make friends and help themselves become part of a multicultural society. They may go through all of these stages or skip a stage in the process of acculturation, as the process of acculturation relies on their individual situations and their resilience in dealing with the changes and difficulties they encounter. EAL instructors can support these learners' pathways to integration by incorporating into their EAL instruction themes and areas related to integration, such as opportunities to explore local communities and mingle with local community members. It is important that learners' decisions to integrate be thoroughly appreciated and supported throughout their EAL instruction (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015).

During the initial stages, as learners with refugee experiences may be anxious about their future and might have unsure feelings about the new land and culture, they may not retain what is taught in class. It can become worse if they are suffering from traumatic stress at the same time. They may develop misunderstandings about their new place of residence and may even start to experience feelings of dislike towards the new culture and its norms. It is important that learners with refugee experiences be provided with opportunities in which they can start to mingle with people from the community they live in, and build their self-confidence and self-esteem. Learners with refugee experiences may demonstrate different learning speeds in different stages. In some stages, they may display adequate knowledge of the English language according to the proficiency level they are placed in. At other times, they may be demonstrating English language skills below the proficiency level they may have initially been tested at for their placement at an English language school. Therefore, it is important that EAL instructors take into account the stages of acculturation for these learners, understand these refugee learners' varied learning needs, know their personal circumstances, and provide EAL instruction accordingly. EAL instructors should initially know their learners and their cultural and social milieu well before EAL teaching begins (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). While getting to know more about their learners, instructors may need to familiarize their learners with school environments and level expectations in the initial stages of language learning.

### **Cultural Diversity**

Along with these stages of acculturation for learners with refugee experiences, cultural diversity is another aspect that EAL instructors can take into consideration, as it is cultural diversity that contributes to learners' taking time to acculturate to the surrounding community. While there are numerous advantages to having people together from around the many cultures, it also brings challenges at the same time. People from different cultural backgrounds may bring with them different expectations, strengths, and needs. Whether it be the teaching and learning process, living style, working hours, friendships, traditional beliefs, or eating habits, different cultural aspects may be carried out or observed differently in different cultures. As instructors, it may be important for them to explore learners' cultural norms, values, and expectations, help learners become aware of each other's culture at least to some degree among learners, and share instructors' cultural backgrounds in the process. This may help build up mutual understanding and shared responsibility among learners and between learners and instructors and may also help learners with refugee experiences gradually move towards acculturation. As acculturation is a

slow process, perseverance is extremely important, which is salient for EAL instructors helping learners with refugee experiences understand their acculturation process.

### **Planning Lessons and Preparing for Lesson Delivery**

Working with adult learners with refugee experiences requires high levels of educational skills and commitment, since some of these learners who have experienced limited or interrupted education may have very distinctive educational, social, and psychological needs (Benseman, 2014). Since instructors are also concerned with the psychological wellbeing of their learners in addition to their education (Due, Riggs, & Mandara, 2015), it is vital that instructors be prepared to consider the needs of survivors of torture and plan and deliver their lessons carefully, keeping in mind refugee experiences and the acculturation process. While EAL instructors may be well prepared for teaching English to language learners in general, they may be in need of more professional development when working with learners with refugee experiences because of various strengths and learning needs these learners may come with.

A warm and welcoming environment should be created so that learners feel free to express themselves during their language learning process. Since these learners' healing may first begin with EAL instructors in class (Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture [CCVT], 1995), instructors need to design appropriate lesson plans and effectively deliver these plans among these learners in class. It is equally important that EAL instructors be flexible in their daily lesson planning. When teaching, instructors may realize that the lesson they have prepared with so much effort may not work on a particular day if this plan makes learners with refugee experiences uncomfortable. It may sometimes be difficult for instructors to know what may frustrate this profile of learner when, so it is essential that instructors come to understand these learners' circumstances and be flexible in what they teach when. Along with such flexibility, there may arise a need for flexibility in outlining course outcomes and contents to be taught (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007), which may also warrant instructors working with their supervisors or members of the curriculum team. Therefore, when preparing long-range or daily lesson plans for classes including learners with refugee experiences, factors, such as learner participation, classroom arrangement, units themes and activities, and testing and assessment should appropriately be considered well in advance.

### **Learner Attendance**

Typically, instructors encourage learners for their regular participation in class, as regular participation is very important for the language learning process. However, instructors may notice that learners with refugee experiences have irregular attendance, stray off-task when in class, or sometimes leave the class halfway through. Such issues with attendance or off-task behaviors may cause inconvenience to the instructor whose responsibility also lies in motivating all learners to actively participate in class while not creating an unfair or biased environment. However, it is critical that the instructor understand why learners with refugee experiences may behave in a particular way. Learners with refugee experiences may be going through numerous difficult situations at the same time as taking their language classes, such as struggling to settle down in a new place, experiencing traumatic stress, and dealing with a variety of other issues. Therefore, instructors may want to give special consideration related to understanding why



learners might have low attendance or remain off-task and provide solutions to minimize learner absences. Learners with refugee experiences may feel uncomfortable letting their instructor know time and again the reasons for their irregularity or absences, so the instructor sometimes may not get a response instantly from learners. Under such circumstances, the instructor has two choices: to meet with their learners and discuss with them a time that the instructor and learners can meet to make up for learners' missed classes, or the instructor may choose to incorporate various strategies to encourage learners with refugee experiences to attend classes on a regular basis if possible (CCVT, 1995). For example, learners can be asked to take responsibility for attendance records, instead of the instructor marking attendance, and learners can mark themselves present upon arrival in class (CCVT, 1995). Providing guest lectures from time to time is another idea that can be implemented for learner motivation and participation. If possible, guest speakers who, in spite of similar refugee experiences, have achieved success in Canadian society can be invited to speak to learners, and this can also motivate learners to attend classes, learn the language, and succeed with their goals as the speakers have.

### **Classroom Arrangement**

When planning lessons, instructors should think of the classroom arrangement in advance. It is preferable that classrooms be arranged in such a way that whenever needed, furniture can be moved around for different grouping patterns without much effort and noise. Classrooms should not be cramped or confining at all. Learners with refugee experiences who have spent their time in prison or a dark, cramped room for long periods of time may feel uncomfortable or scared (CCVT, 1995). Some other suggestions are making the classroom open and bright by leaving blinds, curtains, and classroom doors open as long as possible and encouraging learners to organize the classroom depending on how they would like the classroom to look (CCVT, 1995). School-based environments may remind them of negative experiences in their homeland and may have detrimental effects. Psychologist Dr. Y. de Andrade (as cited in British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015) has suggested that dark hallways, the presence of police, fire and earthquake drills, certain body language and gestures, use of masks, and the burning of firecrackers are some of the anxiety triggers to be avoided or minimized as much as possible when arranging the classroom.

### **Unit Themes and Activities**

Themes and classroom activities are equally important for instructors to take into account during lesson preparation. Activities should be planned such that learners feel comfortable and their motivation to learn the language and their self-esteem is promoted. Based on the school's policies, trips can be arranged. Field trips can be very interactive and motivating events that provide learners with opportunities to explore their community through activities, such as a scavenger hunt, and learn from each other in the group as well as from the members of the community. Learners have the opportunity to mingle around in a non-threatening environment. They can talk freely, share ideas, and perform or see others perform daily chores. Field trips can be esteem-building exercises and learners can be given the opportunity to plan and organize such trips (CCVT, 1995). In addition to such field trips, topics, such as foods from around the world, learners' countries of origin, and home remedies be included (CCVT, 1995). Learners can be asked to bring and share dishes from their culture and give a presentation on the dishes they

share with their classmates. These activities can lead to learners feeling confident and free to talk about topics of interest, which may provide motivation and encourage participation. Adult learners with refugee experiences bring to classes various skills, such as cooking, carpentry, farming, and salesmanship, and these activities can also be included in class. EAL instructors can encourage these learners to share their skills with other learners and instructors. This may help learners feel proud of themselves, which eventually leads to their increasing motivation to attend classes, learn the language, and socialize gradually at the same time.

Against some anxiety triggers, anxiety buffers can be created. Surprise activities can be avoided, and instructors can provide learners with a schedule that is regularly followed in class. Learners should be advised well in advance in case a change is going to take place in class. Changing daily routines and schedules is a sign of unstable situations that learners with refugee experiences have already experienced, and this may trigger fear, which may discourage learners from attending classes. Posting daily schedules on the board and notifying learners ahead of time in case of a major deviation from the set schedule (Cole et al., 2005), introducing limited amount of tasks at a time or on a day, using group work so that attention is not drawn towards a single learner, and familiarizing learners with some sounds that are sometimes heard at school are some of the ways to reduce refugee learners' fear of unexpected change.

### **Testing and Assessment**

Testing is an integral part of learning, and it assesses instructors' teaching and learners' learning, which is based on the assessment purpose: assessment *for* learning, assessment *as* learning, or assessment *of* learning (Khatri, 2014). It is important that learners be assessed on the same subject in a variety of ways so that no learners are left behind in their assessment, as these learners can prove their learning in a variety of ways. EAL instructors can take into consideration that the purpose of assessment is to improve learner learning and that clear communication, without any surprises, be carried out among learners. At the same time, it is essential that assessment not be tough and tiring, and that it not discourage learners from using the language. Post assessment discussion is important for EAL instructors to carry out with learners with refugee experiences to make sure assessment needs meet the needs assessment carried out at the beginning of the course and learners are motivated to continue their language learning. Self-assessment can also be an excellent way to assess learners, as it helps them reflect on their learning process and be responsible for their own learning.

### **Conclusion**

Learners with refugee experiences may have escaped from war-torn countries and armed conflicts, perhaps lost family members and friends, and possibly endured torture and violence. When these adult learners with refugee experiences turn to EAL classrooms, instructors should be aware of their situations and create conditions in which learners feel welcome and safe, whereby these learners can see a positive future for themselves and their families. Some learners with refugee experiences may have escaped persecution, and conflict and undergone subsequent experiences in refugee camps and severe adversity in the journey to their new home, so these learners may be overly dependent on their instructors in the beginning. However, EAL instruction can be carried out such that learners gradually move towards independence and self-

sufficiency. EAL instructors can be aware of the strengths and needs of learners with refugee experiences and provide EAL instruction accordingly. EAL instructors can thus consider the refugee experience and the acculturation process that these learners may go through before planning or delivering their lessons.

### Acknowledgements

The author extends his sincere thanks to the *BC TEAL Journal* editorial team and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback and support in bringing this article to publication.

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